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AUTHOR Marable, June Morehead
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ABSTRACT

This document discusses the founding and establishment of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority's reading experience pilot project. The efforts of this project were aligned with those of Right to Read and Reading Is Fundamental (RIF). Because of the response from parents and children, plans are being made to increase present operations within the next several years. It is hoped that the pilot project will be expanded to a full-scale national effort involving approximately 500 chapters and, potentially, 70,000 members who could assist in upgrading the reading skills of minority students on a tutorial basis. Suggested activities for other organizations to assist in meeting the educational needs of minority children are listed. The appendix includes AKA guidelines for individual tutors, guidelines for setting up a tutorial program, and a list of resources. (LL)

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ALPHA KAPPA ALPHA SORORITY'S READING IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM FOR MINORITIES [1]

About the Author- Dr. June Morehead Marable

Dr. Marable is a graduate of Central State University. Wilberforce, Ohio (B.S.); University of Dayton, Dayton, Ohio (M.S.) and Miami University, Oxford, Ohio (Ph.D.). She is an Assistant Professor at Wright State University, Dayton, Ohio. Her memberships include: State Commission for Right to Read since 1970; public school teacher, elementary reading supervisor and parent director of Early Childhood Education Program for the city of Dayton. She is a co-owner of the Marable Early Childhood Education Center; an Impartial Hearing Officer for Handicapped Children and Coordinator of the National Reading Program for Minorities- Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc.

Reading failure in American schools has been a problem of major concern for the past decade and especially during the past few years. A special report by the United States Office of Education (USOE) acknowledges there is a scandalous record of reading failure prevalent in this country.[2] Documentation of this fact confirms:

1. One of four students nationwide has significant reading deficiencies.
2. Up to one half of the students in our city school districts read far below expectations.
3. More than three million illiterates are in the nation's adult population, and
4. About one-half of the unemployed youth, ages 16-21 are functionally illiterate. [3]

The tragedy of these statistics is that a disproportionate number of those mentioned are minorities. The implications of what is happening to these youth should serve further to convince those who are in a position to make any changes that they must do so with the realization that immediate action is needed. In the words of M. Lee Montgomery, "there are things which all of us must begin to do now." [4] This thought alone merits our consideration, but should do more than arouse verbal responses. WE MUST develop some useful solutions.

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Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority's reading experience project was conceived and organized as a result of this concern. There existed, too, a felt need by the National President, Dr. Bernice Sumlin and members of the Directorate to include reading along with the many creative and diversified programming engaged in by the Sorority at the present time. PERSONAL INVOLVEMENT NOW is the key to the meaningful action carried on by the membership to serve mankind. What better way to fulfill this goal than through "providing the trained resources for the thousands of minority students each year who are constantly meeting with failure because they lack the basic tool of communication-READING.[5]

Why adopt reading as a project?

Since the fall of 1974, when Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority adopted reading as a service project (Pilot) and aligned its efforts with other groups such as Right to Read and RIF (Reading is Fundamental), one question has come up time and again: Why reading? To members of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, this action comes as no surprise, even though it is unique to fraternal organizations. Seldom does a group not involved in promoting educational activities exclusively embark upon the task of committing its resources (human and financial) to a national education problem so highly publicized.

Traditionally, the responsibility and accountability for educating children rested with the schools. A reconceptualiation of this idea, however, has already taken place. James Allen, former Commissioner of Education, promoted this idea in a speech before a group of school administrators in 1969, when he pointed out the seriousness of the problem, which "requires the services of all citizens- reaching beyond the forces of education."[6]

Many organizations have picked up that "torch" long since promulgated by the late James Allen who recognized and dramatized the mounting reading problems affecting school children nationally by organizing the Right to Read program. Alpha Kappa Alpha could not sit idly by and not lend its support. First, and more importantly, from the beginning, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority has been committed to change. This concern for change is inherent in the organization's basic documents.[7]

Since its founding in 1908, the Sorority has distinguished itself in this regard time and again, through its many program offerings. The national program focus reaches across the nation to carry out its commitments of service through a variety of activities including: the Job Corps Center for Women in Cleveland, Ohio; Educational Scholarships and Grants, the AKA Heritage Series and Leadership Training. These programs involve Chapters in community action at the local and national level under the slogan of Personal Involvement Now (P.I.N.). Newly initiated Outreach Communications Programs are also offering the membership an opportunity to more effectively use their skills and experiences in reaching a larger segment of the population. These programs are the United Negro College Fund Drive, Consumer Education Trade Shows and more recently the Reading Experience Project.

A second fact, no less significant, is that Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority is comprised of many professional and college-trained Black women pursuing wide and diversified fields of endeavor such as: teaching, social work, public school administration, psychology, counseling and the like. For intended purposes, the trained personnel is there. A pooling of resources revealed that many skilled reading consultants are available for service in conducting the proposed workshops and organizing reading improvement programs at local levels.

In addition the the national and local capability of the membership, a third necessity was easily met. The organization was willing to provide the needed financial resources to achieve the desired results from any project efforts. Finally, as a group dedicated to becoming involved in all areas that affect the well being of the nation, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority accepts the challenge set by the National Office of Education in calling for a total commitment by all citizens "to see that by the end of the 1970's no one shall be leaving our schools without the skill and the desire necessary to read to the full limits of his capability." [8]

Procedural Approaches used to achieve desired objectives

To initiate the Alpha Kappa Alpha Reading Improvement Program for Minorities, an Ad Hoc Committee was assembled at the request of the National President, Miss Bernice Sumlin, an administrator with the Dayton, Ohio public school system. Serving on that steering committee along with the Ms. Sumlin were: Dr. Rose Butler Browne, Mrs. Barbara Phillips, Mrs. Laura Banks, Dr. Marcia Donaldson, Miss Jo Ann Pyles, and the writer (Reading Program Coordinator). Preliminary plans were finalized and a formal proposal drafted for presentation and adoption by the Directorate (October, 1974).

Several objectives were agreed upon to serve as a basis for the activities to follow. The first provided for the development of a carefully designed series of reading conferences. The purposes behind these conferences were to 1) fulfill Alpha Kappa Alpha's national commitment to social change, 2) recognize a national educational need for the eradication of illiteracy, 3) help members to examine ways and means of becoming personally involved, locally, in the right to read effort, and 4) upgrade members' own skills and knowledge of approaches, techniques, materials, and resources needed to complete the project. Not only that; but members are presently being urged to consider this undertaking a high priority and to give of their personal talents, time and commitment to the success of the project on a volunteer basis. A second, and more pressing objective, was to continue the increased awareness and commitment to the program set in motion during the many workshop sessions at the four major Reading Experiences. Participants were asked to sign personal contracts as a result of their attendance in either Conference. The commitment involved not only a written agreement but a verbal one to return to individual Chapters and enlist membership help in initiating a tutorial reading program at the local level within the needs, resources and time available. This has been accomplished many times over, as indicated by Chapter

reports.

A third objective was aimed at maintaining the receptive climate established at the Conferences so that members could effectively exchange ideas and work cooperatively toward the organization's goals of improving the reading skills of those minority students identified as a result of project screenings. This aspect of the program is being carried out through numerous channels available to the membership. The Reading Experience Team, for one, consists of a group of selected reading consultants who are on call to individual Chapters for inservice meetings. The official publications of the Sorority: the Ivy Leaf and Along the Ivy Line continue to serve as a means of communication, describing reading problems in action or enlightening members and Chapter presidents as to the correct procedures to follow in setting up a reading experience project.

Meeting the Objectives

Retrospectively, having covered a full year of Reading Experiences since the unfolding of the idea, much progress can be reported from the viewpoint of the children and parents being served, the organization itself and the membership as well.

Because of the overwhelming response from parents and children, plans are in process to increase present operations within the next several years. Recommendations are to be made to the Directorate that the Pilot Project be expanded to a full scale national effort involving approximately 500 Chapters and the potential of 70,000 members, who can possibly assist in upgrading the reading skills of minority students on a tutorial basis.

The organization,itself, has received accolades from coast to coast. Newspaper articles have captured the essence of the intent of the program and many Groups are supporting this effort as a model for their own programs, similarly designed. For this,Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority is grateful. Among those organizations extending best wishes for the work being done by the Sorority have been the National Office of Right to Read (while under the direction of Dr. Ruth Hollowy), and the national RIF(Reading is Fundamental)

organization. Citations were received by the National President during the Reading Experience Conferences in the cities of Chicago, Atlanta, New York and Los Angeles. In addition, members of the Reading Team are giving of their time and professional skill in serving as workshop leaders to groups such as the International Reading Association, reporting Alpha Kappa Alpha's progress to-date in implementing corrective reading programs for minority children.

A recent survey of Chapters revealed outstanding results for this year's effort. Programs in progress are of a variety, too numerous to list in their entirety. A few examples are indicative of the kind of responses received.

1. Many Chapters are initiating in-school teacher aid programs.
2. Members are becoming involved in the personal tutoring of students after school hours.
3. Community librarians are lending their service to further the AKA Reading Improvement Program by furnishing consultant service, knowledge of books and facilities for meeting with students.
4. Local members (trained in the field of reading or serving as reading consultants with local boards of education) are directing AKA Reading Improvement Programs for Chapters.
5. Parent groups are being formed by local AKA Chapters to acquaint them with reading techniques being used with children and to impress upon them the need for enrichment and continuity of reading experiences to be done at home.
6. Reading Consultant lists are being formed from the membership rosters to be used in public schools, colleges, universities and organizations for in-service work.
7. Statistical reports on summer reading programs are being disseminated to parent schools as a follow-up to students' participation in the AKA Reading Improvement Program.
8. Local school districts are granting teachers leaves of absence to attend AKA Reading Experiences.
9. Potential school drop-outs are receiving assistance by local members skilled in diagnosis and remedial instruction.
10. Colleges and universities are seeking the services of the AKA Reading consultant team members.

Implications for Other Organizations

The program's purpose is attuned to the times and presents a challenge for other organizations who can render equally as valuable service in meeting the educational needs of minority children through specially constructed plans of action. Several suggestions listed below may prove helpful to other groups; thus eliminating the pitfalls common to initiating any project.

1. The Sorority's reading improvement program can and is serving as a model for other groups. Recommended guidelines used by AKA reading coordinators in setting up Chapter programs, tutorial sessions or professional libraries for instructional purposes can be adopted by other organizations.

2. Second, a listing of AKA Reading Consultants is available for distribution by contacting the National Office of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority or a local Chapter of the Sorority.

3. Local AKA Chapter reading improvement chairpersons may be a contact for other groups interested in developing a similar plan.

4. Statistical data compiled as a result of the AKA Reading Programs may serve as a reference for other groups, in better understanding the methods, techniques and materials appropriate for working with minority students.

It is this writer's contention, however, that no matter what the strategy employed, no outside agency can assume the responsibilities of educational institutions or take over the instruction of teaching staff. We must join forces in helping to see that the task is done and that the best possible approaches are employed in order to complete the task.

It is further suggested that regardless of the educational background or technical skill, there is a contribution that each person can make toward the fulfillment of "Reading: A Right" for every child and "Reading: A Responsibility" of us all. Make a personal commitment today:

1. VISIT the school in your local neighborhood regularly to be certain that the type of reading program offered is relevant to the needs of minority children.

2. WORK with other organized groups currently involved in a definitive plan of action to help eradicate illiteracy in your community school districts. In other words, assess local reading needs.

3. SPEAK OUT in groups when the discussion concerns the reading problems of minority students.

4. PROVIDE funds when necessary to further the cause of setting up a remedial or preventive reading program to benefit minority students.

5. COMMIT yourself and your organization to assuming leadership in planning for and implementing a reading program to benefit minority children in the struggle for "learning has to read" and "reading to learn."

6. RUN for school board offices where decisions are being made affecting the funding of special projects for the reading improvement of minorities.

7. CONTACT your political representatives (local, state and national) when issues affecting the appropriations of funds for the benefit of minorities are being debated.

8. VOLUNTEER your time and talent to restoring the self-confidence and aspirations of minority children on a one-to-one tutoring basis, or as a member of a group.

To do less than the aforementioned, would be to condemn those children, who cannot master the basic communication skills to "obsolescence" in a society that is rapidly becoming technically oriented and impersonal. Reach out; help some child by encouraging him to work to his fullest capacity. In so doing, you will become the richer. The understanding shared with a youngster faced with a reading problem can mean the difference between his success and failure in mastering school subjects, but, more importantly, his achievements in later life.

Footnotes

1. The National Office of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority is located at 5211 South Greenwood Avenue, Chicago, Illinois (60615) Anne Mitchem Davis, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR.

2. "Reading Crisis: The Problem and Suggested Solutions", An Education U.S.A. Special Report National School Public Relations Association (Washington, D.C., 1970), p. 1.

3. Ibid.

4. Wright, Nathan (ed.) What Black Educators Are Saying. Hawthorn Books, Inc. New York., 1970. A quote from M. Lee Montgomery, "The Education of Black Children," p. 48.

5. A publication of the National Office of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. "Programs of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority: Personal Involvement Now." (Produced by Jeffries and Associates, Inc. 1/75).

6. "U.S.A. Special Report," Ibid.

7. A.K.A. Bulletin, Ibid.

8. "U.S.A. Special Report, p. 3.

See Appendix-

Appendix:

GUIDELINES FOR INDIVIDUAL TUTORS

STEP 1. Join AKA Volunteers; attend chapter orientation.

STEP 2. Secure information concerning student assigned:
- A. From Parent – discuss student progress, past school performance and achievements. Get personal commitments of follow-up with child.
- B. From Teacher – request verbal or written information concerning student's school performance, attitude, interest in improvement, etc.
- C. From Student – secure commitment of interest for improving reading skills and regular attendance.

STEP 3. Set up assessment schedule in keeping with your time schedule and student's needs (or contact Team for assistance).
- A. Concept of Reading Inventory (Determine student's attitude toward reading.)
- B. Interest Inventory (favorite books, hobbies, etc.)
- C. Dolch Basic Sight Words – 220.
- D. Slosson Vocabulary Test (gives vocabulary reading level, primary through high school.)
- E. Morrison-McCall Spelling Test or Kottmeyer's (gives grade level, primary through high school.)
- F. Gray Oral Test (use as a basic reading test of word recognition and comprehension skills.)
- G. Select someone in chapter to do testing; reserve tutor's time for teaching.

STEP 4. Interpret tests given. Keep up-to-date, consistent records in a note book or on a chart designed for skill break-down.

STEP 5. Write objectives. Determine specific areas of difficulty from test results and set priorities to be worked on.

STEP 6. Develop lesson plan procedure. Select type and form to be used. Include objectives, strategy, materials and evaluation.

STEP 7. Keep a separate diary on student progress, including attitudes toward reading, reactions to clinical instruction, daily comments. Include remarks by parents from formal or informal conferences.

STEP 8. Develop a case study, student profile, or check list on student progress (reporting needs, test results, recommendations, etc.)

STEP 9. Hold parent conferences at beginning, in between, and conclusion of tutoring session. Follow this up with a thank-you-letter to the parents.

STEP 10. Maintain contact with local Reading Experience Team for suggestions and discussion of student progress. Submit all records to Team upon completion of tutorial session.

GUIDELINES FOR SETTING UP A TUTORIAL READING PROGRAM

PHASE 1. The chapter will hold an orientation program with all members to acquaint them with goals and objectives of the National Reading Experience project and proposed local plans.

PHASE 2. The chapter will set up a Reading Experience Team of consultants to work with chapter members interested in becoming a part of the tutorial program (no restrictions as to professional training.)

PHASE 3. The tutorial team will study the reading needs of students in the local community (Those to be identified are ages 6 through adulthood) and make clinical referrals.

PHASE 4. The tutorial team (sorors who volunteer and reading consultants) will set up specific guidelines for the chapter in meeting reading program guidelines:
- A. Provide assessment instruments to be used.
- B. Give training in test interpretation and strategies to be used when needed.
- C. Compile and/or prepare materials for use.
- D. Decide evaluative devices to be used.
- E. Agree upon dates, time and place for tutorial sessions.
- F. Prepare progress report forms for tutors.
- G. Secure commitment from parents with aid of tutors.

PHASE 5. The tutorial team will prepare for inservice sessions, meeting of parents, school representatives, community resource persons, etc.

PHASE 6. The tutorial team will report to chapter officers and members (progress of tutorial efforts).

PHASE 7. The tutorial team will serve as contact in reporting to local newspapers, T.V. stations, radio stations, etc.

PHASE 8. The tutorial team will maintain consistent cantact with National Office and Reading Experience Coordinator. (Report project goals and progress.)

PHASE 9. The individual tutor will set up procedures to be followed in tutorial session (with student). as well as dates, time, place, and lesson plans consistent with chapter guidelines.

PHASE 10. The individual tutor will develop and maintain student profile for future reference and conferences. (Prepare a written report consisting of a summary of findings, interpretation, strengths, needs identified, and recommendations for improvement.)

RESOURCES

1. Resources for Reading Experience Programs –
Words – From Print to Meaning, by Lou Burmeiter, Addison-Wesley Publishing Co.
Reading Improvement in the Secondary School, by Emerald Prentice-Hall Inc.
How to Teach Reading Systematically, by Gerald Duffy and George Sherman, Harper and Row Publishers, New York.
Power Words, by Donald Edwards, Learning Programs Design, Inc. (Contact Soror June Marable or National Office.)
Phonics, Phonics, Phonics, Phonics: For the Teacher of Reading, by Marion Hull, Charles Merrill Publishing Co., Columbus, Ohio.
Teaching Elementary Reading Principles and Strategies, by Robert Karlin, Harcourt Brace, Jovanivich, N.Y.

Reading Diagnosis Kit, Center for Applied Research in Education, 521 Fifth Ave., New York.
Focused Reading Instruction, by Otto, Chester, McNeil and Myers, Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., Mass.
Diagnostic and Remedial Reading for Classroom and Clinic, by Robert Wilson, Charles Merrill Publishing Co., Columbus, Ohio.